1701 Illusory Castle

After they disembarked at the Castle, Effie bid them farewell and went away, giggling as she walked. Sunny and Nephis stared at her back until she disappeared from view, both not in a hurry to say anything.

‘What do I even say after that?’

Sunny sighed and decided not to say anything. Nephis seemed to be of the same mind.

...His thoughts, however, were on fire in the wake of Effie's antics. So, while Sunny kept quiet, his imagination was running wild against his better judgment. He did not know what Nephis was thinking about, but he was definitely thinking about all kinds of things that he probably should not have been thinking about.

He threw a furtive glance at Neph. Was she really calm?

Was he imagining things, or did her cheeks seem a little pink?

'No, that is definitely my mind playing tricks on me!'

There was no way Nephis would be phased by mere words. It was just his wishful thinking... it was all Effie's fault!

That Effie! She really had not changed at all!

He would have thought that being a married woman with a child would curb her wilder tendencies, but alas. Having a loving family only seemed to embolden the vivacious huntress even more, as if having a safe space to retreat to gave her wicked tongue more power.

It's a miracle that Little Ling is such a sweet boy, despite being raised by that miscreant...!

Sunny inhaled slowly.

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then looked at him with a deadpan expression. After a while, she said in her usual impassive tone:

"Don't mind Effie... Saint Athena. She's always like this."

Sunny chased the improper thoughts out of his mind... or at least tried to... and chuckled.

"That's alright. I'm rather accustomed to it... I used to have a close friend who was just like her. In fact, as much as I hate to admit it, I miss it a little."

She smiled faintly.

"I can't quite imagine."

The two of them started walking and left the pier. Instead of passing through the crowded gate of the castle, Nephis led him to a hidden postern, where two Knights bowed deeply before letting them in. The pass through the thick outer wall of Bastion was like a long tunnel with walls built of white stone.

Walking through it, Sunny wondered what could have brought this mighty wall down and left it laying in ruins, like it lay in the hidden realm that was imprisoned in the reflection of the illusory castle.

But then again, that terrible foe had even shattered the moon, so why would Bastion fare any better?

The Castle... was a city in and of itself. It was gargantuan, with somewhere around a million people living between its walls - almost half of them Awakened. There were hundreds of Masters here, as well, and at least a dozen Saints were always present, either guarding the stronghold or visiting from their own Citadels on business.

Sunny felt quite peaceful and comfortable living in the sprawling city on the other side of the lake, but here in the Castle, he couldn't help but feel a little tense.

Soon, they left the tunnel and entered a lively street.

"It's quite amazing, isn't it?"

His voice sounded a little stifled.

Nephis nodded.

"Indeed. Bastion is not called a Great Citadel for no reason."

From their point of view at the lowest and outermost ring of the great stronghold, the place they found themselves on looked no different from a city street - granted, both the wide paved road and the buildings standing opposite the monolithle barrier of the outer wall were made of the same white stone as it.

There were residential buildings, merchant stalls, commercial establishments, and people hurrying on their daily errands. However, all of it - except for people and later additions to the original architecture - seemed a little too grand in scale, as if built for creatures that weren't quite giants, but also not quite humans.

However, really, this street was a natural part of the defensive fortifications. Bastion was a marvel of military engineering, designed to withstand the most terrible slege. There were all kinds of courtyards, keeps, towers, and auxiliary buildings here, placed in a seemingly chaotic manner... but all of them followed a thoroughly purposeful design.

If viewed from above, Bastion resembled an artificial mountain separated into distinct levels, with concentric circles of inner walls protecting each of them and the main thoroughfare piercing each of the walls as it scaled the mountains in a spiral. If one wanted to reach the main keep from either of the outer gates, they would have to circle the mountain many times, passing many lesser gates in the process.

Even things like the direction of the thoroughfare were full of purpose. If someone managed to breach the outer wall, they would have to follow it clockwise, which meant that their sword hand would be to the next wall, while their shield hand would be away from it, letting the defenders rain arrows on the attackers more effectively.

All in all... Sunny did not envy the warriors of Clan Song, who might have to siege this castle one day.

Even he felt that the task was much too daunting

Bastion seemed truly Impregnable.

But, of course, It wasn't. The ruins hidden in the moonlit reflection were proof.

Nephis led him deeper into the ancient castle, making sure that they would be seen by everyone who had time to look. The reactions people were giving them were much more intense than those at the lakeshore settlement - mostly because much more of them recognized who Nephis was.

Sunny could practically feel the veneration and admiration they felt for her. Wherever Changing Star went, people's faces suddenly looked bright and inspired, as if just seeing her gave them strength. Well... it made sense. Nephis had become somewhat of a symbol after the Forgotten Shore, and her fame only grew further in the last four years.

Especially for the people of the Sword Domain, she was a champion of peace and prosperity. A radiant figure who defended them from the horrors of the Nightmare Spell, and whose light illuminated all of humanity.

Princess Nephis... one of the two invincible Sword Sisters of Anvil's Domain.

The nickname Effie had given her in the Dark City was not that outlandish anymore, if at all.

So, Sunny could understand the gazes of adoration directed at Neph.

However…

The more intensely people admired her, the more confusion and simmering hostility his presence by her side caused them.

Who was that dainty stranger walking by Changing Star's side?

Who does he think he is, being so close to our princess?

Suddenly, he felt a little uncomfortable.

'I've... might have underestimated the consequences of playing Neph's secret darling’

He might have underestimated it severely!

As a passerby glared at him with obvious hostility, Sunny made sure that Nephis could not see, and glared back with a cold menace.

You can glower all you want, but are you worthy?

All of you wretches combined are not fit to stand by her side, only I am!

Well, that was what his glare was meant to convey, at least.